

Interpreting and changing the world

Article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at a joint IWCEN/Ella Baker School meeting on 'Developing Political Education today' at The Warehouse, Birmingham, on 7th March 2020

'Independent working-class education' (IWCE) was a term coined in 1908 by the Ruskin College students who founded the Plebs League.

In the early 1900s, miners, railway-workers, textile workers and workers in many other employment fields were leading struggles, instructing one another in socialist theory, and publicising socialism to broader masses. The Plebs League and the associated Central Labour College are examples of such activity.

The Independent Working-Class Education Network is trying to bring about an equivalent situation in modern circumstances. However, we want to go further and have workers elaborate theory for themselves.

Practice in that earlier period included highly participatory Marx reading groups. Is this something we need to do now or not? I will now use a short text written by Marx to explore this issue.

Marx wrote, originally in German: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.' This was the last of eleven 'theses' - in fact very short handwritten notes to himself - prompted by Ludwig Feuerbach's 1841 book *The Essence of Christianity*. Marx wrote these notes at the age of 27, in Brussels, in early 1845. These 'theses' are only partly about Feuerbach himself. The whole document was discovered and published by Frederick Engels in the 1880s, after Marx's death. Engels wrote that these notes contain 'the brilliant germ of the new world outlook'.

The eleventh 'thesis' is often understood to mean: stop messing about and get on with taking action. For example a version I saw once read 'Philosophers only interpret the world; the point is to change it.' This rewording is misleading. What, then, did Marx mean here by 'the philosophers'?

Marx himself had a PhD in philosophy. In Berlin in the early 1840s he was actively involved in the 'Doctors' Club', a group of left-leaning 'Young Hegelian' lecturers, teachers, writers and the like, most of whom had been trained in Hegelian philosophy at the University of Berlin. (Hegel himself had died 1831)

The main figure in the Doctors' Club was the writer, lecturer and, initially, friend and mentor of Marx, Bruno Bauer. Across the Young Hegelian movement as a whole, the most prominent figures were Bauer, Feuerbach, David Strauss and Caspar Schmidt (pen-name Max Stirner).

The Doctors' Club engaged in a high profile discussion about religion. They did this as a surrogate for the kind of political discussion that was banned by Prussian state. For example, in 1835 Strauss had written his influential *Life of Jesus*, demolishing the idea that Jesus was a supernatural being. Another example was Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. This was a materialist rejection of Hegel's objective idealist philosophical standpoint.

In the eleventh of Marx's 'theses' on Feuerbach, then, 'the philosophers' doesn't mean philosophers in general throughout history, but rather, people like the Young Hegelians, including the members of the Doctors' Club - plus, up to a point, Hegel himself. It also, more generally, meant the kind of people formed by university education in Germany in that period to develop the dominant ideas of the time and promulgate them, for example as lawyers or teachers.

It's important to understand that Marx did not lump all such people together. For example, his critique of Feuerbach was friendly, whereas he became increasingly hostile to Bauer and Stirner. Further, there are grounds for thinking that in some of what

he wrote in this period he distinguished between, on the one hand, 'the philosophers' and, on the other, 'philosophy', viewed as potentially a progressive force.

How did Marx come to split with the Berlin-based Young Hegelians?

Having lost the chance of becoming an academic himself, he became in the autumn of 1842 a journalist on - and then editor of - the *Rheinische Zeitung* newspaper, which was financed by liberal members of the rising industrial bourgeoisie in his native Rhineland area of Germany. (The Rhineland at this time was under Prussian rule but was more industrialised than Prussia itself. Also, because it had been under French rule from the 1790s to 1815, it had a more modern legal system and local government set-up than Prussia itself.)

This journalistic work, for example when he was covering the conflict between Rhineland peasants and the Prussian state's wood-theft laws, forced Marx to think about the relation between state power and economic circumstances. This in turn led him to view the Young Hegelians, who were based in Berlin - that is, the capital of Prussia - and especially Bauer and Stirner, as apolitical, as increasingly self-absorbed, and as prone to ultraleft posturing.

As an editor and journalist, Marx took a radical democratic stance that led to the *Rheinische Zeitung* being suppressed by the Prussian government in January 1843, and in the March he went to Paris, where his views developed in a new direction. In Paris, he mingled with exiled leftwing German artisans, French working-class socialists, and thinkers like Flora Tristan. In Paris during 1843 he wrote two published articles sharply criticising Bruno Bauer. (We will come back to these articles later.) Also in Paris he joined up for a second time with Engels, and learnt from him about textile workers in Lancashire (where Engels had been living in the aftermath of the Newport and Sheffield Chartist risings and the wave of strikes by industrial workers that came to be known as the Plug Plot 'riots').

In the summer of 1844 there was a strike and embryonic insurrection by weavers in Silesia, which at that time was also, like the Rhineland, a province of Prussia. This triggered a key turning point in Marx's thinking. He wrote an article hailing it as the emergence in Germany of a militant industrial proletariat on the UK model, but going, if anything, still further.

In January 1845 the Prussian government got the French government to banish Marx from Paris, and on 2nd February 1845 he moved to Brussels. Here, with Engels, he participated actively in a debating and collective self-education organisation in which workers and radical intellectuals mingled. He gave talks to this group on his economic ideas, and these talks eventually evolved into the pamphlet *Wage Labour and Capital*, which in the early 1900s was a key text for working-class reading groups, including the Plebs League in the UK and similar groups both in the UK and in the US. Marx's 'theses' on Feuerbach were a product of this Brussels milieu.

When Marx referred in the eleventh of these 'theses' to 'the world' he meant both the environment to the extent that it's natural, and the social order to the extent that it results from human activity, choices and plans. What, then, were Marx's ideas about understanding the world?

The second 'thesis' says, in effect, that humans come to understand 'the world' by working in and on it. In other words it implies that the raw material of most human knowledge must originate in the experience of those who can't avoid changing the world - that is, of routine, especially physical, workers. And what, in Marx's view, was the relation between this from-below, experiential knowledge and 'interpretation'?

In class society, this raw material is appropriated from routine workers, and turned into a system of transferable concepts that in normal circumstances supports the interests of the ruling class. This appropriation is carried out by traditionally trained intellectuals like Marx himself, using processes of abstraction, elaboration, generalisation and the like. In short, then, 'the philosophers interpret the world'.

Obviously workers possess in potential a powerful capacity to reflect on and draw conclusions from their experience - that is, to interpret the world for themselves. But normally their efforts to do so are marginalised and disrupted - 'jammed' if you like - including by traditional intellectuals who act as gatekeepers of the ruling-class's ideological order.

When Marx wrote here about 'changing the world', he meant radically transforming the basis and future development of the social order, including its interaction with the natural environment, such that those who are to do this go far beyond just making piecemeal ameliorations. How and by whom did he think such a change could be made?

Mixing with workers in Paris and Brussels and hearing about Chartist activity in Britain and the weavers' activity in Silesia, confirmed for Marx an idea about this that he'd already worked out. In one of his key 1843 Paris articles (critiquing Hegel's theory of law) he had written: 'Material force must be overthrown by material force. But theory also becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses'. He argued that this would be a two-way process in which: 'As philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy.' These intellectual weapons he envisaged as 'the criticism of religion' (that is, of the dominant ideology that normally constrained workers' thinking) and, leading on from that: 'the criticism of law' and of 'politics'.

In other words, he thought that if they separated themselves from the direction the Young Hegelians were now taking, philosophically trained people like himself could take part with workers in a process of mutual education, and thereby trigger fundamental change.

In short, then, the 11th 'thesis' on Feuerbach is not saying that we can't start changing the world until we stop interpreting it, but rather, that the capacity to interpret and the capacity to change must be integrated with one another. The relevance of this to us now could be summed up as follows.

Working-class people must re-equip themselves in the sphere of ideological struggle. It is no good standing up in the economic sphere and remaining on our knees in the ideological one. Either we produce our own ideas or we will have the bosses' ones, whether we know it or not. Until working-class people realise - that is, start to fulfil - the potential they already possess to elaborate their own insights, every gain they make will sooner or later be reversed.

Therefore we have to get people like labour historians to share their knowledge with us, in a framework that we control. And above all, we must build a Plebs League-type set-up that addresses present-day challenges.



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